

Cambridge O Level English as a Second Language 1158 for centres in Mauritius (for examination from 2024)

Writing an informal email

Overview

The purpose of an informal email is to share information with the reader, usually to give news about what happened in our personal lives. The audience of the informal email is someone we know quite well, usually a friend. This means that the language and tone of the email tends to be informal and often includes examples of spoken English including contractions, phrasal verbs and idioms.

Content

Content covers:

- Task fulfilment (i.e. whether the piece fulfills the task, how relevant the content is and an awareness of style, register, purpose and audience).
- Development of ideas (i.e. the level of detail provided).

Language

Language covers:

- Range (i.e. the complexity of grammatical and lexical structures).
- Accuracy (i.e. the level of grammatical and lexical accuracy, the type of errors and whether these impede communication).
- Organisation (i.e. whether ideas are organised and sequenced effectively, the range of linking words/phrases and other cohesive devices).

Tips for writing an informal email

Language

- think about the suitable vocabulary for this text type to ensure the tone of your email is appropriately informal
- to make your email sounds informal, you can also use appropriate phrasal verbs (e.g. give up), idioms (e.g. out of the blue) and contractions (e.g. I've, it's been, you'll) instead of full forms
- include a range of topic related vocabulary (e.g. judges, audience, the first prize, compete in)
- to ensure your email is communicated skillfully and reads well, try to include clauses that begin with 'which', 'when' 'if', etc.
- when you finish writing your email, read it through and check for missing words (e.g. prepositions and articles) and your grammar and spelling.

Organisation

Your email should be divided into clear paragraphs. It is advisable to include the idea from each bullet point in a separate paragraph. In addition to these, there should also be a brief opening and closing paragraph. Most emails follow the structure below and may contain the following ideas:

- Brief opening paragraph 1 – you can ask how your friend is / apologise for something / state the reason for writing the email.
- Paragraph 2 – your response to the idea in bullet point 1.
- Paragraph 3 – your response to the idea in bullet point 2.
- Paragraph 4 - your response to the idea in bullet point 3.
- Brief closing paragraph 5 – this paragraph can include questions you have for your friend / a future invitation / a suggestion/recommendation for your friend.

To make it easier for the reader to understand and follow your email, you should link your ideas using a range of cohesive devices. You can use linking devices to link ideas in sentences (e.g. that's why, also, while, soon after that), and also to introduce new ideas/sequence ideas in paragraphs (e.g. You'll never believe this, but..., anyway..., before anything else..., later that day...).

Example task

This is an example of a **Paper 1 Exercise 5** task. We have annotated the question below with some **guidance** for candidates to help them prepare their answer and encourage them to focus on what the question is asking for. This information is not given to candidates in the examination.

You should first read through the **task** and all the **instructions** very carefully. Before you start writing your email, **plan** how many paragraphs you will need and what ideas you want to include in each paragraph.



You recently took part in a school competition. Something unusual happened during the competition.

Writing an email to a friend about this.

In your email you should:

- explain what you did to prepare for the competition
- describe what happened during the competition
- say what you enjoyed most about the experience.

Write about 120 to 160 words.

The number of words is for guidance: write **between 120 and 160 words**. Paying attention to the guidance for word limits will help you to plan your time in the examination more effectively.

The **purpose** of this email is to provide detailed information about a school competition and say what happened that was unusual. The details are provided in the three bullet points. You must address all three bullet points in your email.

The response to this question needs to be in the form of **an email**.

The intended **audience** for the email is a friend. This means that the **register** should be **informal**. To achieve this, use appropriate grammatical and lexical structures.

Example Candidate Response – high

Examiner comments

Hi Andy, ¹

² Hope you're doing OK and you had a loads of fun on your recent school trip. Sorry I haven't wrote for while, because I was so busy.

³ I don't know if you remembered, but last week I've taken part in a short story competition organised by my school. To prepare, I read a lots different stories and studied the writers' styles very carefully. When I finally wrote my own story, I kept tweaking it and make it perfect. Then I just practised endlessly reading it out loud. ⁴

When the day came, you'll never guess what happened! I got on the stage and, out of blue, there was a power-cut. I haven't memorised the whole story, so I panicked. But then the audience switched on the lights on their phones to help me finish reading out my story.

I must say – the audience were amazing – I'll never forget this moment. I didn't win but I was so proud about myself that I didn't give up and carried on. ⁵

⁶ Anyway, let me know when you're free. We got to meet and talk more.

¹ Best wishes,

Karim

¹ The candidate starts the email with an opening salutation. The candidate also includes an appropriate salutation at the end of the email.

² The candidate starts the email with a short opening paragraph, asking how his friend is and apologising for not writing earlier.

³ The candidate develops the idea from the first bullet point by providing examples of how he prepared for the competition. This also shows an excellent sense of purpose. The ideas from the second and third bullet points are also well developed.

⁴ The candidate uses a range of topic related vocabulary (e.g. 'writers' styles', 'tweaking', 'reading it out', 'stage', 'win'). The candidate also uses a range of common as well as uncommon vocabulary (e.g. 'practised endlessly', 'a power-cut', 'memorised').

⁵ The candidate's choice of linking words and other phrases is consistently appropriate for the style and register of an informal email.

⁶ The candidate includes a concise closing paragraph suggesting a meeting.

Mark for Content = 6 out of 6

Mark for Language = 8 out of 9

Total mark awarded = 14 out of 15

How the candidate could have improved their answer

The example answer fulfils the task and shows excellent understanding of purpose and audience with the style being consistently appropriate for this text type. The content is fully relevant and the candidate develops the ideas from all three bullet points well by adding examples and providing reasons and detailed explanations. The ideas are clearly organised into paragraphs with consistently appropriate linking words and other cohesive devices (e.g. but then, anyway, when the day came). The candidate shows very good awareness of the register required in an email to a friend. The informal tone is achieved by the choice of vocabulary (e.g. 'I didn't give up', 'out of the blue', 'you'll never guess what...', 'we've got to meet'), ellipsis (e.g. 'Hope you're doing OK', 'Sorry I haven't...') and punctuation (e.g. exclamation marks, the use of dashes instead of commas).

The candidate uses a range of common and less common words and phrases appropriately (e.g. tweaking, practised endlessly, memorise, panicked, carried on). The candidate also uses a range of simple grammatical structures (e.g. 'I didn't win', 'I panicked', 'I was so busy', 'we've got to meet') as well as more complex, especially time clauses.

Despite this being a successful response, the level of accuracy isn't always maintained throughout the email. The candidate has made several errors and that is the reason why this response didn't achieve full marks for language. However, these errors do not impede communication. The weaker areas include tenses, verb forms, the wrong use of prepositions, the wrong use of definite and indefinite articles and omission of words, mainly prepositions and articles.

Common mistakes

Candidates sometimes write an email that omits information from one or more of the bullet points. Some responses also don't contain the same level of development for each of the bullet points. Candidates should be encouraged to read the task very carefully and identify the key details that are needed in their response. They should also pay attention to the command words from the bullet points (e.g. describe, explain, suggest) as these will help them with the development of the content (e.g. a detailed description, adding an explanation/explaining a reason, etc.) and with the choice of language (e.g. specific vocabulary – a beautiful long sandy beach / grammatical structures – a range of narrative tenses / cohesive devices – the reason why... / appropriate fixed expressions – why don't you...).

Another problem can be the use of lexical items that are too formal sounding for this text type and, therefore, not very appropriate. Most commonly, these inappropriate items include cohesive devices (e.g. in addition to that, furthermore, nevertheless) which are more suited to semi-formal or formal text types, such as reports or essays.

Some lexical items, especially phrasal verbs and idioms are sometimes used incorrectly, which may impede communication (e.g. my house is a far-cry from the city centre, so I missed the start of the competition / when the competition got over, I was so relieved). Learners should be encouraged to learn new vocabulary in context to ensure they fully understand not only the meaning, but also the correct usage of it.

It is also not uncommon for candidates to use a very limited range of narrative tenses, mostly the past simple when describing a personal anecdote. Candidates should be encouraged to use a wider range of tenses and other grammatical structures (e.g. conditionals – if I'd come on time, I wouldn't have missed the beginning / past modals – I should've done it earlier) in their emails. Some candidates also tend to overuse the present perfect (e.g. I've prepared...) instead of the past perfect (e.g. I'd prepared).

Candidates should also be encouraged to use contractions (e.g. I'd, it's been, you'll) in their emails, as this is another feature that adds to the appropriacy in style for this text type.

Examination preparation

In class, learners should practise writing informal emails on a range of topics focusing on a different purpose each time. For example, write an email to your friend about your recent holiday: explain why you had to postpone the holiday / describe what happened during the holiday / suggest why your friend should stay at the same hotel as you, etc.

After brainstorming for ideas and planning their responses in groups, learners then complete their draft. Learners can share their responses for discussion and peer feedback. Learners then rewrite their first draft based on the feedback given. Final drafts can be shared in groups or with the whole class for help with proof-reading and peer evaluation. To encourage self-reflection and self-evaluation, learners can also be given a simplified version of the mark scheme and use it as a tick sheet to check whether all the requirements have been met.

Classroom activities

Syllabus ref. (AOs)	Learning objectives	Suggested teaching activities
<p>Writing</p> <p>W1 communicate information, ideas and opinions</p> <p>W2 organise ideas into coherent text using a range of linking devices</p> <p>W3 use a range of appropriate grammatical structures and vocabulary</p> <p>W4 use appropriate register and style for the given purpose and audience</p>	<p>Writing strategies:</p> <p>Learners are able to use correct basic grammar, use punctuation, use correct spelling for common words and some problematic words, use modal verbs for giving instructions (you should/could, etc.)</p> <p>Learners are able to use an informal tone and register for giving advice to a friend.</p>	<p>Writing activity: an informal email (invitation)</p> <p>Learners write an informal email to a friend inviting them to an event (e.g. a concert, a dance performance, etc.). This task can be adjusted according to local amenities and cultures, e.g. the invitation could be to a friend's birthday celebration, a local festival, etc. Learners' emails should include instructions and directions for getting to the venue, information about the dress code and other rules, arrangements for getting home, etc. Useful words and phrases can be offered or brainstormed by the whole class. The email should sound warm and inviting. Learners can brainstorm ideas, plan and draft paragraphs for the emails in pairs or small groups.</p> <p>Error correction: Punctuation and spelling errors or grammar and vocabulary issues can be extracted from drafts of learners' written work. Learners can explore the type of error and why it may have been made and suggest a correction. Improved drafts can be circulated for analysis and comment. This can be done in pairs to be less intimidating and ensure all learners participate. (I/F)</p> <p>Extension activity: Learners benefit from focus on tone and register, as this is often a difficult area. They could be given some examples of good and inappropriate tones within a given context and ask to grade the examples from most to least appropriate and discuss why.</p> <p>Learners can analyse good and poor attempts at informal emails and compare their ideas with the examiner's/teacher's comments.</p> <p>Learners can also practise their writing skills online and get instant feedback. For example: https://writeandimprove.com</p> <p>Extension activity: More advanced learners could be presented with less obviously inappropriate tones and be asked to re-write the pieces in a better style.</p>
<p>Writing</p> <p>W1 communicate information, ideas and opinions</p> <p>W2 organise ideas into coherent text using a range of linking devices</p> <p>W3 use a range of appropriate grammatical structures and vocabulary</p>	<p>Writing strategies:</p> <p>email, blog entry</p> <p>Learners are able to judge the tone and register for different purposes, make appropriate vocabulary choices, structure work in coherent paragraphs and use a variety of grammatical structures and tenses.</p>	<p>Writing activities: email, blog entry.</p> <p>Learners brainstorm ideas for writing an email from a climber to his family describing his adventures or what he might say in a blog entry.</p> <p>When planning and drafting writing, sentence structure (including structure for narrative tenses) can be further explored. Suitable vocabulary and expressions for telling a story can be elicited, repeated, practised in example sentences and written on the board.</p>

W4 use appropriate register and style for the given purpose and audience

Extension activity: Suitable words and phrases for writing in an informal register can be elicited and discussed. Learners can write more emails related to travel for homework using these phrases. **(I)**

More able learners can write at greater length. They can be challenged to experiment with different styles/tones/viewpoints, e.g. write a narrative of the rescue of a mountain climber from the point of view of a rescuer.